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Who are the women of our discontent? and : John Boorman's Excalibur: a film resurgence of male conquest mythology

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John Boorman's *Excalibur:* A Film Resurgence of Male Conquest Mythology

by

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Where Are the Women of Our Discontent?
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Laurence Olivier's translation of William Shakespeare's *Richard III* into film has profound implications regarding the re-presentation of women and this thesis paper argues that Olivier's *Richard III* reflects a patriarchal ideology determined to erase woman as historical or political presence in favor of woman as sexual object. The omission of Queen Margaret's character from the film text, the visual and aural manipulation of the character of Jane Shore, and the cinematic treatment of Lady Anne reveals a pattern that suggests an attempt to marginalize or constrain female subjectivity on the screen.

When a Shakespearean drama is made into a film it is often necessary to delete or omit material that appears in the original play[1]. Commercial exigencies and the desire of filmmakers to satisfy spectator expectations can result in the elimination of characters, dialogue, and even entire scenes. There is also a tendency towards adding material, generally in the form of emblematic images that help to bridge the chasm that lies between the classic dramatic rhetoric of Elizabethan drama and the photographic realism of film. The former relies on an oral/aural tradition of description and imagination, while the latter thrives on visual cues that have the potential of subverting the utterances of the performers, especially when those utterances take the form of verse or poetry. Laurence Olivier resorts to a number of additions and subtractions in his re-visioning of *Richard III,* and an examination of several of these differences between film and play proves illuminating from the perspective of feminist film theory. There are several changes initiated by Olivier in *Richard III* that seem to suggest a patriarchal ideology determined to erase woman as historical or political presence in favor of woman as sexual object, as locus of and for the privileged male gaze.

The alterations in Olivier's film text of Shakespeare's *Richard III* are numerous, but one discerns a certain pattern in these revisions that indicates a conscious or subconscious attempt to marginalize and constrain female subjectivity on the screen. Although the decision as to what material from the play is retained and what is cast aside is integrally related to film economy, it also can reveal the dominant ideology or apparatus from which these crucial decisions emerge. Judith Mayne notes that the insights of psychoanalysis expose how "cinema works to acculturate

individuals to structures of fantasy, desire, dream, and pleasure that are fully of a piece with dominant ideology" (18). What Olivier chooses to expurgate can be just as, if not more, revealing ideologically as what he decides to preserve. Olivier's most notable deletion from Shakespeare's *Richard III* is the figure of Queen Margaret, and his most noticeable addition is the visual insertion of Mistress Jane Shore. Queen Margaret, widow of King Henry VI, appears extensively in two of Shakespeare's five Acts, and she is an integral player throughout the entire first tetralogy, while Mistress Shore, though mentioned several times in the course of the play, never makes a physical appearance on stage. Olivier's decisions as to what material and characters from the original play survive the director's cut are obviously informed by the demands of traditional filmmaking expediency and reflect, perhaps, the difficulties film producers face in transposing Shakespeare into film narrative, but they also may point to unconscious stratagems implemented by a patriarchal hegemonic discourse that reveals its intentions, when faced with the dilemma of "who gets to speak and who is silenced?"

Why cut Queen Margaret? Why add Jane Shore? What are the repercussions for women in Olivier's interpretation of Shakespeare? Most of the criticism that addresses Margaret's absence in Olivier's text posits a desire on the director's part to centralize the figure of Richard in the play, and points out the superfluous nature of Queen Margaret and her prophecies in a world no longer governed by notions of superstition and divine retribution. Dale Silviria observes that there are only two compositional elements in Olivier's film of *Richard III*; "there is Richard; [and] there is

all else" (218). Virtually all of the other characters exist in order to lend significance to the figure of Richard. Olivier, the director and lead character, surrounds himself with an ordered sphere of supporting props, which serve to give meaning to his, and only his, existence. Outside of Richard, there is only a two-dimensional world of melodrama that he manipulates at will. Mary Ann Doane suggests, "Melodrama closely allies itself with the delineation of a lack of social power and effectivity so characteristic of the cultural positioning of women" (*The Desire to Desire* 73). The major characters in melodrama are normally characterized as impotent and passive; the protagonist fails to act in a way that could shape events; instead, the characters are "acted upon," and melodrama "confers on them a negative identity through suffering" (*The Desire to Desire* 73). Women are particularly vulnerable within the economy of melodrama and its employment of pathos, an emotion that is reinforced by the disproportion between the weakness of the victim and the seriousness of the danger to which she is exposed. The weakness of the female victim is most evident in Olivier's film when Lady Anne succumbs to Richard's amorous overtures, a decision that ultimately results in her death. But the expulsion of Margaret from Olivier's text and the visual insertion of the muted body of Jane Shore are also examples of the exploitation of women for phallocentric purposes.

Olivier's portrayal of Richard is often viewed as the performance of a performance. Jack Jorgens writes, "much of our pleasure is in watching Olivier the consummate actor play Richard the consummate actor....Olivier is more a splendid entertainer than psychologist or realist, but rarely has so external a performance fit the

work so well" (143). This certainly appears plausible as a "vision'" which Olivier has with regards to his re-presentation of Richard. The film suggests that Olivier is not as interested in the social and political dimension of the play as he was with the portrayal of an individual constantly warring with the demons of voyeurism and narcissism. Such a portrayal mirrors the perspective supposedly shared by the male film spectator according to feminist psychoanalytic film theory. In her article, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," Laura Mulvey maintains that there are two possible male spectator positions, "Each is associated with a look: that of the spectator in direct scopophilic contact with the female form displayed for his enjoyment [voyeurism] and that of the spectator fascinated with the image of his like set in an illusion of natural space [narcissism], and through him gaining control and possession of the woman within the diegesis" (34). Olivier-as-Richard engages in these forms of spectatorship throughout the film. For example, Richard is shown "spying" on Lady Anne as she passes by with her husband's funeral procession and the film is replete with instances where the Duke of Gloucester secretly observes members of the court. Richard's fascination with his own image is likewise documented in the film, particularly during the wooing scene with Anne when he vows,

> I'll be at charges for a looking glass,
> And entertain a score or two of tailors
> to study fashions to adorn my body:
> Since I am crept in favor with myself
> (I.ii. 255-258)

The audience is encouraged to identify with Richard and to vicariously experience his voyeuristic and narcissistic impulses.

For Olivier, Richard is the prime mover, and a compendium of lesser satellites revolve around his eminence. Margaret becomes expendable in a plot centered on Richard because she is one of the few characters in Shakespeare's play who challenges the usurper and is overtly resistant to his devilish orchestrations. A brief example from Act I illustrates the strength and command of language Margaret possesses:

> O Buckingham, take heed of yonder dog!
> Look when he fawns he bites: and when he bites,
> His venom tooth will rankle to the death.
> Have not to do with him, beware of him;
> Sin, death, and hell have set their marks on him,
> And all their ministers attend on him.
> (I, iii, 288-293)

Diane Carson argues that "a woman's verbal adeptness is regarded as sometimes enigmatic, sometimes indecipherable, but always threatening " (215). The danger posed by Margaret's utterances are obvious. Her powerful and condemnatory diatribes would prove a problematic force of opposition for Richard in Olivier's film and, as such, a dangerous or subversive distraction from the phallocentric focus of the movie.

Other critics attribute the removal of Margaret as a possible and logical consequence resulting from the difficulties in transforming a work whose thematic foundation is based on an Elizabethan *weltanschauung* into a work which proves relevant for a modern film audience. It is generally conceded that the greatest structural principle in Shakespeare's *Richard III* is the manner in which divine retribution works God's will in the world. Divine retribution is a thematic, even didactic, structure, and Queen Margaret and her curses are its agency. The prophetic

scheme articulates the historical viewpoint of Tudor propagandists like Thomas More, Edward Hall, and Raphael Holinshed, all sources for Shakespeare's play. Olivier's deletion of Queen Margaret effectively disembowels the play's superstructure, and the voice of prophecy and discontent is silenced. Constance Brown comments on the logic of such a maneuver:

> Margaret and her prophetic curses must necessarily seem a little quaint to modern audiences. A prophetic curse is a rather mechanical device for structuring a rambling history and heightening dramatic irony -- the sort of effect an audience would appreciate only fully when superstition was a way of life. It is a device which a modern production of Richard can do without, especially since there are other possibilities in the play which can be more profitably developed -- as Olivier apparently felt there were.
>
> (132)

One of the "other possibilities" which Olivier chose to develop was the figure of Mistress Shore and the implications of that treatment will be discussed at length shortly. But the removal of Margaret, though seemingly legitimate according to Brown's argument of prophecy as archaic, ignores the preservation of the plethora of other "superstitious" elements within Olivier's text. We still get the "prophecy of G" speech from Clarence, the "damned witchcraft" of Queen Elizabeth and Mistress Shore, and Richard's visitation by ghosts and spirits in the final act. Would not these vestiges of magic, the occult, and the supernatural be equally "quaint" for the modern viewer?

It appears that the eradication of prophecy and its antiquarian cohorts is rather selective on Olivier's part, and therefore the exclusion of Margaret continues to be problematic. Perhaps the notion of "divine retribution" is not the element which Olivier deems irrelevant, but rather the idea of retribution voiced and enacted through the

figure of a powerful and punishing female. Carson points out, "The diverse ways in which the outspoken woman challenges and confronts, subverts and questions the established patriarchal norm reveal a heteroglossic dialogic that resists closure" (215). The assertive and aggressive Margaret of Shakespeare's text would prove a troublesome adversary and prognosticator in "Olivier's/Richard's World" and must therefore be summarily exorcized. The irony is apparent in an argument which calls for the deletion of a character due to her representation of the unscientific concepts of prophecy and superstition, and yet uses these very same concepts as a basis for performing the exorcism of Margaret from Olivier's film text. Margaret represents the forces of the female demonic which must be expelled from the male province inhabited by Richard.

It seems ludicrous for anyone to attempt to claim that Margaret is of little or no consequence for Shakespeare's play, yet Olivier's film revision and certain critics do exactly that. Margaret is one of the connecting threads woven through each play of Shakespeare's first tetralogy. Her presence lends a coherence and consistency to the evolution of the Bard's dramatic chronicle of The Wars of the Roses. A large number of female characters appear in Shakespeare's early histories, and their active participation in political events is a noticeable contrast to their paucity in the later histories. Olivier's negation of Queen Margaret can be viewed as a strategic effort to obliterate any role for women in the public sphere. Most of the action involving the female characters in Olivier's film relegates them to the private, domestic realm. Silviria notes that Richard's villainy is accentuated and seems even more criminal when

it extends beyond the world of political intrigue and fratricide to a direct attack on the Family:

> Since the boys remain Richard's chief victims, the Queen's relative prominence as their chief guardian establishes a bipolar focus. Richard's attack on Family is fundamentally an attack on mother and children. This is probably the case in Shakespeare too but, to achieve his singular clarity, Olivier deletes both the rivalry between Queen Margaret and Queen Elizabeth, and the second wooing scene in which Richard believes he wins her [Elizabeth's] daughter's hand in marriage. In other words, Olivier has deleted the undomestic aspect of the Queen, both the non-motherly and the unmotherly. Moreover, while in due course we are told Richmond will have the daughter to wife, this small victory over Richard barely reaches our consciousness; the last time we see Queen Elizabeth, Richard has defeated her. (234)

Any strength of character which may have been given to Queen Margaret and Queen Elizabeth by Shakespeare has been expurgated by Olivier. Margaret's ability to curse and condemn is simply erased, and Elizabeth's duties are confined to the strictly maternal.

In the male-dominated world of Olivier's Richard, the powerful or oppositional female is non-existent. The emphasis on the domestic nature of Shakespeare's dramatic women, their re-presentation as only wives, mothers or sexual objects confines them to the space of the home. In Olivier's version, Shakespeare's female characters are accorded a place only in so far as they appear as accessories to male designs and desires. From a feminist viewpoint, it can be argued that the non-representation of Queen Margaret is a violent amputation of woman as aggressive adversary to Richard's/Olivier's intentions. Indeed, one can use Margaret's words to Buckingham in Act One of Shakespeare's *Richard III* to comment on Olivier's

decision; "Uncharitably with me have you dealt,/ And shamefully my hopes, by you, are butcher'd" (I, iii, 274-75). Shakespeare's Richard asks of Margaret, "Wert thou not banished on pain of death?" and her reply could be easily directed to Olivier in response to his removal of her character from his film; "I was; but I do find more pain in banishment/ Than death can yield me here by my abode" (I, iii, 166-67). The injury done to Margaret and Shakespeare's vision by Olivier's abolishment of her character is obvious. By refusing to give her a voice in the film, by consciously choosing to eradicate her prophecies and the power which undergirds them, Olivier succeeds in marginalizing the figure of woman in his film text. Shakespeare's text seems almost prophetic in devising how Queen Margaret will be dealt with by Olivier. Gloucester asks of Buckingham following Margaret's warning to him of Richard's treachery, "What doth she say, my Lord of Buckingham?" The Duke's reply is prescient; "Nothing that I respect, my gracious lord" (I, iii, 294-95). Margaret's powerful words are so little respected that they fail to find their way into Olivier's screenplay.

The removal of Margaret appears even more sinister and contrived when we juxtapose it with the filmic creation of Mistress Shore by Olivier. The fact that Queen Margaret was deemed unessential to Olivier's/Richard's narrative takes on added significance when we realize the director determined that a woman who is mentioned but never appears in Shakespeare's *Richard III* would become a key component of the cinematic version. How is it possible to justify the expulsion of Margaret, a character with more than two hundred lines, by claiming her irrelevancy and insignificance, while at the same time endowing Jane Shore, who is essentially a Shakespearean footnote,

with a film presence that extends to well over an hour of screen time? What Olivier does with the character of Mistress Shore is illuminating in terms of the objectification and subjugation of women in film for the purposes of reinforcing a phallocentric discourse. Furthermore, an examination of the historical source material for Jane Shore, its subsequent adaptation by Shakespeare, and its eventual evolution in Olivier's film, exposes the workings of film apparatus in the construction of a female subjectivity that reinforces patriarchal doctrine.

One of sources for Shakespeare's Mistress Shore is Thomas More's *History of King Richard III*. In More's *History*, some three and a half pages are devoted to a story "some might think too slight a thing to be written of and set among remembrances of great matters....Her doings were not much less [than those of "great men"], albeit they be much less remembered, because they are not so evil" (57-58). This curious digression on More's part serves a purpose in the relating of Richard's history in the humanist tradition. In his introduction to More's *History*, Richard Sylvester observes that "the figure of Jane contrasts sharply with that of the plotting protector. Her relative innocence, her humble sacrificing of herself in the desires and interests of others makes her an ideal foil to the scheming Richard" (xvii-xviii). Noteworthy is the fact that More's treatment of the story of Mistress Shore differs from all its subsequent literary manifestations[2] in being a sympathetic portrayal that avoids mawkish sentimentality or distortion. More expresses the complexity of her situation by presenting both the lascivious side of her nature and position (first as Mistress of the King, then as Hasting's courtesan) and her disinterested benevolence.

> This woman was born in London, worshipfully friended, honestly brought up, and very well married (saving somewhat too soon), her husband an honest citizen, young and goodly of substance. But forasmuch as they were coupled ere she were well ripe, she not very fervently loved for whom she never longed. Which was haply the thing that the more easily made her incline unto the king's appetite when he required her. Howbeit, the respect of his royalty, the hope of gay apparel, ease, pleasure, and other wanton wealth was able to pierce a soft, tender heart....When the king died, the lord chamberlain took her, either for reverence or for a certain friendly faithfulness....she never abused to any man's hurt, but to many a man's comfort and relief; where the king took displeasure, she would mitigate and appease his mind; where men were out of favor, she would bring them in his grace; for many that highly offended, she obtained pardon. Of great forfeitures she gat man remission. And finally, in many weighty suits, she stood many men in good stead; either for none or very small rewards, and those rather gay than rich, either for that she was content with the deed self well done; or for that she delighted to be sued unto and to show what she was able to do with the king. (56-57)

I have quoted from this portion of More's text at length in order to demonstrate the vast differences between More's, Shakespeare's, and Olivier's representations of Mistress Shore. More's treatment of Shore involves a tempered censuring of her immorality while extolling her humanity and kindness, a portraiture that counterbalances the unethical milieu of ambition and ruthless cruelty of the York court. The importance to More of providing a rounded, even-handed depiction of Mistress Shore is evident when the polemical intentions of his *History* are acknowledged. As George Carvier explains, "no biography of a king before it or since, if one except the propaganda of the latter seventeenth century, has appeared which is so definitely inimical towards its subject" (Beith-Halahmi 12). Part of More's agenda is to teach a moral lesson based on history. Richard, as usurper, fratricide, and murderer of his nephews becomes the epitome of tyranny. More requires a foil to temper the villainy of Richard, and Mistress Shore serves (somewhat) as a corrective. Because Richard's

claim to the throne is precipitated by the averred sexual transgressions of his brother Edward, it was necessary for More to deflect criticism of this implied lasciviousness in order to focus on the murderous malevolence and the lust for power embodied in Richard. More's assessment of the relative severity of Edward's wantonness pales in comparison to the homicidal excesses of Richard. Concomitantly, the adultery of Mistress Shore seems minimally culpable when placed next to Richard's heinous cruelty.

However, a funny thing happens to Mistress Shore on the way to Shakespeare's forum. Shakespeare adapts More's Mistress Shore by means of subtle allusion rather than actual corporeal representation. She is not one of the *dramatis personae* in *Richard III* and never physically appears in the play. But several references to her are made that make her presence felt in the background, and the personality that emerges through these allusions is not More's generous, albeit misguided, woman but a lewd, ambitious strumpet who revels in her privileged position in Edward's court.

The playwright appropriates Shore using her as a vehicle by which Richard and his co-conspirators vilify Edward's licentiousness in order to make the rumored bastardy of his prodigy more believable as well as palatable. Shore becomes a pawn for the power politics of Shakespeare's Richard, and any and all mollifying aspects of her personality which More elaborated are suppressed in order to serve Richard's (and Shakespeare's) purposes. As Beith-Halahmi notes, "the personality of Jane Shore is subordinated to Shakespeare's central design in this play whereby power supersedes

humanity. We always see her through the eyes of Richard, for Buckingham voices Richard's point of view and Clarence is influenced and prompted by his hellish brother. To this faction Jane Shore seems the emblem of the lasciviousness of Edward's court" (270). There is little doubt that Mistress Shore is codified by the masculine members of the York court as a source of dangerous wantonness that threatens the stability of the crown. Evidence of this appears in the very first Act and Scene of Shakespeare's text. Clarence is being conducted to the Tower, and Richard warns him of the dangers when "men are rul'd by women."

> *Clarence:* By heaven, I think there is no man secure
> But the Queen's kindred, and night-walking heralds
> That trudge betwixt the King and Mistress Shore.
> Heard you not what an humble suppliant
> Lord Hastings was [to her for his] delivery?
>
> *Gloucester:* Humbly complaining to her deity
> Got my Lord Chamberlain his liberty.
> I'll tell you what, I think it is our way,
> If we will keep in favor with the King,
> To be her men and wear her livery.
> The jealous o'erworn widow and herself,
> Since that our brother dubb'd them gentlewomen,
> Are mighty gossips in our monarchy.
>
> (I, I, 71-83)

Clarence and Richard insinuate that the Queen and Mistress Shore wield power over king and court that is rooted in their sexuality, and that men are sent to or released from the Tower according to these women's whims. Shore's solicitations to Edward on behalf of courtiers who had incurred the King's displeasure were valorized by More. Shakespeare lends such behavior a discreditable air by linking Shore's suing for the

release of an imprisoned Hastings with the Lord Chamberlain's adulterous "conversation" with Mistress Shore. The kindness of the King's concubine thus becomes merely the calculated intrigues of a whore for a prospective client. Her power over the King is the unholy one of an adroit courtesan over a lustful lover. And since Shakespeare never allows Mistress Shore the opportunity to appear or to speak for herself, the audience is left little choice but to see her through the eyes (or words) of the male protagonists. Admittedly, the dissembling quality of many of the male characters in Shakespeare's play calls into question the truthfulness of their depiction of Shore, but the fact that no textual evidence ever arises that would vindicate her leaves the audience with few positive choices in its judgment of her character.

The benevolent aspects of Shore's personality espoused by More in an effort to accentuate Richard's devilishness, are repressed in order for Shakespeare to establish the threat of immorality that hovers around the York court. Sir Thomas More details not just Shore's generosity but also her "pleasant behavior" and her "proper wit." He informs us that she "could both read well and write, [was] merry in company, ready and quick of answer, neither mute nor full of babble, sometime taunting without displeasure and not without disport" (57). But Shakespeare and Richard recast this characterization of Shore's intellectual graces into features of physical attractiveness; "We say that Shore's

wife hath a pretty foot,/A cherry lip, a bonny eye, a passing pleasing tongue" (I, I, 93-94). Clearly Shakespeare is not interested in an accurate or fair description of Jane Shore's personality; therefore she is denied a verbal and visual presence. The audience

has nothing on which to judge her reputation beyond the declamations of the playwright's characters. Through denigrating references to her, Shakespeare exemplifies the grievous fault and criminal recklessness of Edward and his councilors.

Although these faults might be tolerable weaknesses in private life, they become inexcusable defects for representatives of sovereignty and are thus dangers to the commonwealth. This is most apparent when Buckingham, in an effort to persuade the Mayor of London of Hasting's complicity in treasonous acts against Gloucester, overtly connects the harlot Shore with Hasting's depravity; "I never looked for better at his hands/ After he once fell in with Mistress Shore" (III, v, 50-51). While it is true that the corruption of the court and the questionable moral character of Richard may cause the audience to doubt the veracity or legitimacy of Shore's depiction, the relative ease with which her character is called into question and the willingness of the male protagonists to castigate her conduct reveals the tenuous position held by women in patriarchal discourse. Since we are not provided with evidence to the contrary and because not everything that Richard, Buckingham, et al. say is a falsehood, the lasting impression of Shore is anything but positive.

The transformation Mistress Shore undergoes from More's *History* to Shakespeare's *Richard III*, reveals the manipulation that women particularly are subject to in a patriarchal discourse. Women are susceptible to an appropriating re-presentation that semiotically displaces, distorts, and redirects a subject's individuality. Ultimately, Shore's only opportunity for existence is within the discourse of men. She is "spoken," she does not speak. As an object of exchange between men, both literally

and figuratively, a sign oscillating between concubine and comforter, she represents the means by which men express their relationships with each other, the means through which they achieve an understanding of themselves and their fellow men. Linda Williams comments on the fictionalized position women assume in a phallocentric discourse; "they are already playing assumed roles, already *not there* as themselves" (520). Woman as woman is never or rarely present. She functions primarily as a entity that can be manipulated at will in order to satisfy the demands of the male hegemony. The limited agency allotted to Mistress Shore through Richard's description of her powers of persuasion and her influence with the king is severely undermined by the way those powers are negatively portrayed and the fact that Shore is never allowed to respond to the charges leveled against her.

Shakespeare's adaptation of More's Jane Shore as an emblematic re-presentation of libidinous desire and excess is hyperbolically expanded in Olivier's film version of *Richard III.* It is interesting to note that Jane Shore was on his mind almost from the beginning of the project. Roger Manvell relates a conversation he had with Olivier early in 1955, when Olivier was first organizing the film. Olivier claims, "Alex Korda asked me to do it, and both Vivien and Carol Reed helped persuade me to tackle it. I had hoped that Carol Reed would direct it, but it was not possible. Nevertheless he made a lot of helpful suggestions. But he would keep on saying, 'Larry, we must have a scene written between King Edward IV and Jane Shore!' " (48). Shakespeare's play contains five specific references to Mistress Shore and, as mentioned previously, she never actually appears on stage. Olivier, however, not only retains the

Shakespearean references but inserts the body of Jane Shore (Pamela Brown) into his *mise-en-scene,* and her presence in over a third of the movie is a constant visual reminder to the viewer of the sexual corruption that surrounds the York court.

When I say that Jane Shore's presence serves as a *visual* reminder, I mean exactly that; she never speaks a word. Olivier's mute-ation of Shore allows her body to be inscribed in the phallocentric discourse without ever giving her a voice. Constance Brown finds nothing amiss with this representation. "To visualize the corruption of the court Olivier added Mistress Shore....She is always present in the court, ministering to the king or hovering in the background, and on the whole she is mute, *for she needs no dialogue. Her presence speaks for itself*" (140, my italics). Indeed, in a phallocentric discourse, a women is not entitled to a presence or dialogue which she can claim as her own. Kaja Silverman believes that "The male subject is granted access to what Foucault calls 'discursive fellowships,' is permitted to participate in the unfolding of discourse. In other words, he is allowed to occupy the position of the speaking subject — in fiction, and even to some degree in fact. Within dominant narrative cinema the male subject enjoys not only specular but linguistic authority" (309). Such a position of narrative and lexical privilege is not an option for women. It is readily apparent that woman are denied linguistic authority in Olivier's film. Margaret has simply been deleted, and it's impossible for Mistress Shore to have any verbal clout since she never speaks a word the entire time she is on screen.

It could be argued that Olivier is under no obligation to give Mistress Shore any lines, since Shakespeare did not in the original. But adaptations of Shakespeare's plays

have a long history of dialogue being invented or added to the prototype. Olivier notes that "some of the most famous lines like 'Richard's himself again' and 'Off with his head, so much for Buckingham' are not Shakespeare's at all, but were added later by Garrick or Cibber, who thought nothing of adding scenes adapted from *Henry V* to their productions" (Cotrell 267). To say that the director was merely being faithful to Shakespeare's text by not giving Mistress Shore any lines would be to ignore the interpolations, such as those mentioned above, that do appear in Olivier's *Richard III.* Furthermore, since Shore's visual presence is so extensive in the film, her silence seems overdetermined. Spectators expect characters in sound films to speak and, when they don't, their silence takes on added significance. Since there is no apparent physical infirmity that prevents Jane Shore from vocalizing, the viewer is coerced into interpreting her silence as symbolic of her (lack of) position within the male dominant discourse.

Laura Mulvey has observed, "woman stands in patriarchal culture as signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his fantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning" (*Issues in Feminist Film Criticism* 29). Olivier's film seems to suggest that Shore needs no voice; her body is her identity. It is the predictable reassertion of body (a body that has always been the site of oppression) over speech that characterizes much of masculine mainstream representations of women. The meaning that Mistress Shore is made to bear in Olivier's film text is monolithic; she becomes a silent symbol of sexual

degeneracy that threatens the moral and, by extension, political stability of the York court. Mistress Shore's narrative demonization, visual objectification, and vocal elimination by Olivier enables Richard to use her as part of his scheme to attain the crown, a strategy he employs with delight and vigor. Richard's references to Shore are part of his program to cast aspersions on those who stand in his way to the throne. That Edward's court is rife with corruption cannot be denied, and Brown claims "Richard's many contemptuous references to Mistress Shore are completely justified" (140). He may have a legitimate purpose for directing disparaging remarks towards Shore as Brown suggests, but to assume that these comments are "completely justified" ignores both Richard's perfidy and Shore's inability to reply to his accusations. What can be argued is that Richard's claim that Shore is responsible for his withered arm is completely *un*-justified, since he's been that way from birth. The viewer may not be taken in by these illogical accusations, but the fact that Richard's rhetoric is convincing/coercive to his cabinet, suggests the perilous and powerless position of women within patriarchy and its representations.

A close examination of Jane Shore's appearances in Olivier's *Richard III* discloses the director's intention of having her body "speak for itself," and what is being said is hardly complimentary. The movie opens with Edward IV's coronation (a scene that actually occurs in Shakespeare's *3 Henry VI*). Shore is shown standing in a doorway as the King and his train proceed from one room of the palace to the throne chamber. As the King passes by Shore, he stops momentarily and chucks her on the chin with his scepter, even though the Queen is on his arm, trying both to pull him

away and ignore the focus of his wandering attention. Although Shore has been announced in the opening credits, the uninformed viewer has a difficult time discerning her identity and her relation to the King. But the visual cues are unmistakable. The lustful glances exchanged between Shore and the King, coupled with his sexually suggestive use of his scepter make it apparent that the two are intimately involved. The touching of Shore's chin with the symbol of his phallic authority indicates both power and sexual transgression. Olivier's establishing shot of Mistress Shore leaves little doubt as to the role she will play in the film narrative.

As the coronation procession continues into the throne room, Jane Shore crosses diagonally in front of the King's followers. Again, Olivier provides a visual clue that helps delineate Shore's role. By having her walk across and against the grain of the King's train, Olivier gives the viewer a powerful image of a woman who stands for the disruption of ritual and ceremony. Her physical movements demonstrate a disturbance of the norm. Further evidence of the disruption embodied in Mistress Shore occurs in the same scene as the King's coronation ceremony concludes with a parade through the streets of London. As The King exits the palace he proclaims,

> And now what rests but that we spend the time
> With stately triumphs, mirthful comic shows,
> *as befits the pleasure of the court.*
>
> (*3 Henry VI,* V, vi, 42-44, my italics)

As the italicized line is spoken, Edward turns directly towards the camera in which Jane Shore is foregrounded so that he appears to specifically address her. The juxtaposition of spoken text and image creates a conjoining of Mistress Shore with "the pleasure of

the court" that the film viewer can't help but notice. The female body is melded to a libidinous concept so that they become synonymous and inseparable.

The scene continues, and next we see the King mount his horse and ride off amid the cheering citizens. This movement of the king is from left to right. Clarence and Buckingham are stationed in front of the doors of the palace. As Shore rides by in a conveyance, she throws a furtive glance, complete with batting eyelashes, towards the pair of gentlemen. Shore's movements in the scene are the opposite of the king's. She is seen traveling from right to left. The direction of their movements is crucial and revealing. As Louis Giannetti observes in *Understanding Movies,* the eye tends to read a picture from left to right, and physical movement in this direction seems psychologically natural, whereas movement from the right to left seems inexplicably tense and uncomfortable. Classic film technique generally has protagonists of a movie travel toward the right of the screen, while the villains move toward the left (79). This shot of Shore in motion might encourage a subconscious negative response from the viewer. Shore's cinematic movement from the right side of the screen to the left combined with her coquettish actions towards Clarence and Buckingham bombards the spectator with images that "speak" the part of Mistress Shore. The viewer can do little but conclude that this vixen's sexual appetite is insatiable and dangerous, encompassing the King and his councilors. There is no historical evidence of any dalliance between Shore and Buckingham or Shore and Clarence, so it appears that Olivier is attempting to create a general mood of lasciviousness through the use of Shore's mute-ated body and this motif continues throughout the film.

The next scene in which Shore appears is during Edward's signing of Clarence's death warrant in the throne room (an addition to Shakespeare's play by Olivier). She appears from out of a doorway at the rear of the chamber and glides towards the King, handing him a cup of wine. The association of Shore with sex, death, and wine is a recurring theme in Olivier's film. The king rises, and she assists him up a spiral staircase, presumably to his bed chamber, cradling his arm in hers. All the while, two monks are chanting a Psalm in Latin, but they take time out from their clerical duties to look askance as they see Shore conducting the King to his "rest." The monks (and perhaps the film spectators) are shocked at this flaunting by the King of his mistress, and although it might be possible to perceive her as some sort of nurse, the look exchanged between the priests dispels any notion of propriety in Shore's relationship with the King.

The spectator does not have very long to wait for another appearance by Mistress Shore. Richard is in the Tower with Buckingham as they discuss Clarence's imprisonment. Shore drifts into view (once again moving from right to left) and stands outside of one of the cells as Richard and Buckingham engage in the following dialogue with Brackenbury, the Lieutenant of the Tower:

> *Brakenbury*: I beseech your Graces both to pardon me:
> His Majesty hath straitly given in charge
> That no man shall have private conference
> (Of what degree so ever) with your brother.
>
> *Richard*: Even so? And please your worship, Brackenbury,
> You may partake of any thing we say:
> We speak no treason man. We say the King
> Is wise and virtuous, and his noble queen

Well strook in years, fair, and not jealous;
We say that Shore's wife hath a pretty foot,
A cherry lip, a bonny eye, a passing pleasing tongue;
And that the Queen's kindred are made gentlefolks.
How say you sir? Can you deny all this?

Brakenbury: With this, my lord, myself have nought to do.

Gloucester: Naught to do with Mistress Shore? I tell thee fellow.
He that doth naught with her (excepting one)
Were best to do it secretly alone.

Brackenbury: What one, my lord?

Gloucester: Her husband, knave. Wouldst thou betray me?

The way this is performed by the actors is in the manner of light-hearted banter and bawdy talk between men. The double-entendre of "naught" is played for laughs by Olivier and everyone seems to be enjoying himself immensely — at the expense of Mistress Shore. All of this conversation occurs with Mistress Shore a scant ten feet away. She is seen in the background and is staring at the men as they discuss her. It appears that not only is Mistress Shore dumb, she is deaf as well, or at least Richard, Buckingham and Brackenbury treat her as if she cannot hear. More probable is that they don't really care if she overhears their jibes and taunts. She is figuratively *in absentia*. Her presence is merely symbolic. In her article, ""Film and the Masquerade," Mary Ann Doane posits that women are often positioned as the butt or object of the joke in film and photographic images.

> The spectator's pleasure is thus produced through the framing/negation of the female gaze. The woman is there as the butt of a joke — a "dirty joke" which, as Freud as demonstrated, is always constructed at the expense of a woman. In order for a dirty joke to emerge in its specificity in Freud's description, the object of desire — the woman — must be absent and a third person (another

man) must be present as a witness to the joke. (53)

The levity exchanged between Richard, Buckingham and Brackenbury within the sight of Mistress Shore effectively negates her gaze, and her presence in the shot merely serves to accentuate her invisibility as far as these men are concerned. She is present only as a symbol, an object of desire and ridicule.

In this Tower scene, Mistress Shore is dressed differently than when she appeared at the coronation. Her white-veiled headpiece has given way to a burgundy-red conical hat that is an unmistakable stand-in for the phallus and a locus of fetishism. The Freudian concept of fetishism involves displacing the sight of woman's imaginary castration onto a variety of reassuring, but sometimes surprising, objects -- shoes, corsets, rubber gloves, hats, cigars -- which serve as signs for the lost phallus but have no direct connection with it. Mulvey asserts:

> The message of fetishism concerns not woman, but the narcissistic wound she represents for man. Women are constantly confronted with their own image in one form or another, but what they see bears little relation or relevance to their own unconscious fantasies, their own hidden fears and desires. They are being turned all the time into objects of display, to be looked at gazed at and stared at by men. Yet, in a real sense, women are not there at all. The parade has nothing to do with woman, everything to do with man. The true exhibit is always the phallus. Women are simply the scenery onto which men project their narcissistic fantasies.
>
> (*Visual and Other Pleasures* 13)

Both male fear and fantasy are "spoken" through the costuming of Mistress Shore. Her body becomes a projection of masculine desire and dread. The similarity between her headgear and the engorged phallus constructs her as an object of display, a visual reification of masculine anxiety about the threat of castration embodied in women. The

fear of castration is relieved by crowning Shore with the phallic stand-in and her appearance is over-emphasized by the fact that she is voiceless. According to psychoanalytical theories of fetishization, her attire represents a disavowal of castration by the substitution of the conical hat, and her silent presence becomes reassuring and satisfying rather than dangerous.

After Hastings' release (Mistress Shore hands over the appropriate papers to Brackenbury), he accompanies Shore, Richard, Buckingham, and Catesby as they travel towards the palace. Dialogue is exchanged between Richard and Hastings, and in the midst of their conversation concerning the King's failing health, Richard looks directly at Shore and states, "O, he hath kept an evil diet long./And overmuch consum'd his royal person" (I, i, 139-140). The innuendo is comically blatant and the viewer can't help but feel for Mistress Shore (especially if they know anything about actor's pay scale for spoken parts — Pamela Brown will not be getting any extra money). Olivier's lascivious motif continues apace.

The prison party travels to the palace and Richard begins to accost Queen Elizabeth with charges of being responsible for Clarence's (and Hastings') internment. Their conversation is foregrounded, but in the deep background the alert spectator notices the figure of Mistress Shore as she glides along the raised platform that rings the throne room. The floating figure of Jane Shore enhances the salacious atmosphere Olivier has been at pains to construct. Her spectral-like presence works subtly to enrapture and enrage the voyeuristic viewer. Queen Margaret "floats" through Shakespeare's tetralogy, establishing a historical/hysterical presence in the text. Olivier

chooses to substitute a libidinous floating femme fatale for a contentious and castigating apparition. The removal of "herstory" (Margaret) in favor of sexual temptation (Jane Shore) could signify an ideological urge to erase woman as political power and presence and replace it with an image of woman as sexual object. Shore is displayed iconically for the gaze and enjoyment of men, the active controllers of the look. She embodies what Mulvey describes as "looked-at-ness," an erotic spectacle.

Dale Silvaria suggests that "the floating figure in Olivier's *Richard III* represents almost an allegory for the human placement within the context of the film's world and *mise-en-scene.* Like the floating figure, characters within the drama are creatures proceeding sedately along prescribed paths or orbits" (222). Conceptually, this proves appropriate for a feminist interpretation in that all the female inhabitants of Richard's world are moving "sedately along prescribed paths" that he chooses for them. A feminist analysis reveals how the floating leit-motif is typical for a patriarchal film discourse that shuttles "woman" through predetermined lanes of language and visual symbolic re-presentation. Richard's verbal assault of Queen Elizabeth in the foreground coupled with Shore's silent and compliant hovering between two potential suitors in the background can be read as illustrative of the two positions available to women as objects within the economy of male scopophilic desire. Mulvey states,

> [W]oman as icon, displayed for the gaze and enjoyment of men, the active controllers of the look, always threaten to invoke the anxiety it originally signified. The male unconscious has two avenues of escape from the castration anxiety: preoccupation with the enactment of the original trauma (investigating the woman, demystifying her mystery), counterbalanced by the devaluation, punishment, or saving of the guilty object; or else complete disavowal of castration by substitution of a fetish object or turning the represented figure into

a fetish so that it becomes reassuring rather than dangerous.
("Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" 35)

Richard's interrogation of Queen Elizabeth can be read as representative of one aspect of voyeurism, the first avenue of escape, an attempt to investigate and punish the woman (Elizabeth) who provokes the anxiety, while the spectral figure of Jane Shore can be seen as indicative of fetishism, the second avenue of escape, which builds up the physical beauty of the object, transforming it into something satisfying in itself. Within one shot, Olivier manages to provide both theorized outlets for male castration anxiety.

Another scene that demonstrates conventional film use of woman-as-object occurs in Edward's bedchamber. Olivier begins the scene with a shot of Shore. There is an interesting dissolve from the previous scene in which Clarence is murdered. His executioners drown him in a butt of malmsey and the blend of blood and wine that overflows the cask cascades from the Tower down to the Thames. Olivier dissolves to a shot of Mistress Shore as she returns a jug of wine to a shelf in the wall near the king's bed. This association of Jane Shore with wine (the second time she is coupled so in Olivier's film) connects her to Dionysian pleasures and bacchanalian delights. The dissolve also implies a conjunction of feminine excess and male death. As Edward conducts the bed chamber peace conference, making "fair love of hate," Richard enters the room with news of Clarence's death. At the moment when Richard makes his announcement, Edward (clutching a rosary all the while) is seen kissing Mistress Shore's hand, while his wife has her back to him. The news is too much for Edward and he passes away. As his family and followers pay their last respects, Mistress Shore

and Hastings, seated on the side of Edward's bed, play patty-fingers while laying the dead king's hands upon his breast and stare longingly into each other's eyes. Since they are in the immediate foreground of the shot at opposite ends of the screen, they form the frame of Olivier's sex/death *mise-en-scene.* The camera holds on the two stationary figures for over twenty seconds, and the viewer is left with a lasting impression of the lascivious motif that is centered on Shore's mute body. She is figured as an object of desire, a unit of exchange who is "inherited" by Hastings from the dead King.

The last time we see Mistress Shore, she is in Hasting's bedroom and they are kissing and embracing when a messenger interrupts their tryst with news of Stanley's dream of the boar. Once again, Mistress Shore's body "talks" to the spectator, informing them of the inherent danger she represents. Her sexual licentiousness is juxtaposed with Stanley's premonitions of doom and the analogy drawn between carnality and death implies that female sexuality is menacing. She will not appear again, but there are two more references to her name and reputation. The interesting thing about these two references is that they are identical; the exact same line is used on two separate occasions to describe Mistress Shore, and it is spoken by two different characters. At the council meeting, Hastings is accused of treason by Richard for protecting that "damned strumpet" Shore. As executioners prepare to lead Hastings to the block, the Archbishop turns to Buckingham and whispers "I never looked for better at his hands/ After he once fell in with Mistress Shore" (III, v, 50-51). This is Buckingham's line in Shakespeare's play and he directs it towards the Lord Mayor

after Hastings has already been beheaded. By placing these words in the mouth of the Archbishop, Olivier manages to have a high church official condemn Hasting's adulterous conduct with Mistress Shore. Perhaps more significantly, the line becomes a running joke. In the next scene, Buckingham is explaining the details of Hasting's treason to the Mayor when the Mayor parrots the Archbishop's pronouncement; "I never looked for better at his hands/ After he once fell in with Mistress Shore." Knowing glances and suppressed laughs are exchanged among the other passengers in the Mayor's carriage. Church and state unite in a moral denunciation of Hastings and Shore. This verbal echo serves to reinforce the aura of lecherousness that has surrounded Mistress Shore since her first appearance in the film.

I have tried to demonstrate that Jane Shore's silence, her lack of voice, is detrimental for both her character and the female spectator. The fact that she is "seen and not heard" certainly seems to have nothing but negative consequences with regards to female representations and subjectivity. Are there any possibilities that Mistress Shore's mute body may have positive implications? Perhaps. It can be argued that the silent spectacle of woman on the screen may actually serve as a site of resistance to patriarchal discourse. Kaja Silverman suggests that "to permit the female subject to be seen without being heard would be to activate the hermeneutic and cultural codes which define woman as a 'dark continent,' inaccessible to definitive male interpretation" (313). At the very least, Mistress Shore's continual visual presence can prove unsettling to the viewer who expects someone who is given so much screen time to speak a few syllables. Her mysterious silence may be disconcerting to spectators

accustomed to decoding aural messages in the film environment.

Quite often in melodrama, and *Richard III* can be understood, in part, as a male melodrama, women are aligned with exclamatory excess and speech that is unreliable, emotional, or hysterical. Queen Elizabeth's threat to "acquaint his Majesty" with Richard's "blunt upraidings and bitter scoffs" and Lady Anne's lamentations over the body of her dead husband are tinged with pathos and sentimentality. These utterances are usually devalued and subordinated in phallocentric discourse. But when there is no dialogue to decode, the dominant masculine viewpoint is jeopardized. It is much more difficult for the male viewer to dismiss something that isn't there. In Shore's case, silence can be read as oppositional. Linda Dittmar asserts that such silence can have a positive value, "It can signal a holding of oneself apart, a resistance that cherishes one's inviolability. When emphasized, it can displace conventional notions of audibility and fluency and encourage audiences to listen in new ways and discover new, hitherto unsuspected, modes of eloquence and assertion" (393). The possibility of such a reading undoubtedly exists, but whether this is the preferred or dominant reading is questionable. Still, the fact that such an oppositional interpretation is available confirms that fissures and gaps are present in patriarchal discourse.

Olivier's treatment of a third female character in his film further illustrates the marginalization of female subjectivity in patriarchal films. The director's interpretation of Richard's scenes with Lady Anne (Claire Bloom) in the movie have an entirely different emphasis than those of Shakespeare's text. The original text concentrates more on Richard's seduction of the widow Anne as a political power play, a means of

intrigue whereby his ambitions for the crown can be more easily realized. Although there are undertones of sexual desire in the play, the film version highlights the sensual attraction between Richard and Anne, and focuses on woman as sexual object of desire rather than as political pawn. Olivier makes two significant changes in the courting scene that radically redirect the viewer's interpretation. First, he has Richard woo Lady Anne over the coffin of her husband Edward instead of her father-in-law Henry VI. This makes the young widow's seduction even more daring and revolting than it is in the original. That Richard would attempt to make love to Lady Anne literally over her dead husband's body compounds the perversity of his actions. It also makes her eventual acquiescence seem more egregious. Second, Anne's eventual capitulation is eroticized by the exchange of two passionate kisses between her and the hunchback. Nowhere in Shakespeare's stage directions is such an exchange indicated. There is an interesting symmetry established in the scene by Olivier. Prior to her surrender, represented visually by her kissing Richard two times, Anne twice spits in Richard's face. Surely, both Shakespeare's and Olivier's renditions point to the intimate relation between love and hate, but the graphic sensuality employed by the film highlights the nefarious nature of Anne's giving in to fear and desire. It also situates her as a sexual toy, available for Richard's amusement. Her identity is based on her body and her beauty. For the woman in Olivier's film, physicality replaces politics in the patriarchal hierarchy.

The absence of Queen Margaret, the presence of a mute, sexualized Jane Shore, and the objectification and subjugation of Lady Anne all position woman as a locus of

lack, of emptiness. From a feminist perspective, each of these women can be said to be "discontented," one because she isn't in the film, the others because of the way they are represented. This discontent is also a likely reaction on the part of the feminine/feminist spectator. Margaret's disappearance eliminates any possible female challenge to Richard's (patriarchy's) power, and Mistress Shore's silent, somnambulant sojourn through Olivier's film text positions her as little more than a mouth-less piece of patriarchal discourse. Lady Anne's sexual objectification denies her the possibility of feminine subjectivity. Appropriation and alienation of "woman" is a necessary by-product when "woman" is subjected to the male gaze. It becomes a disciplinary tactic whereby the determining male gaze projects both its fantasy and its fears onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly. While it would be impossible to say unequivocally that Olivier is an active and willing participant in the objectification and subjugation of woman in his film *Richard III*, his role as director and star implicates him in the institutional construction of the privileged male gaze and the subsequent damage and marginalization inflicted on the female characters in *Richard III*. His film is a link in what Mayne calls an "apparatus, a standardized arrangement of component parts, a machine with a variety of interlocking functions" (17).

Recent feminist criticism has been devoted to illustrating that this apparatus is not monolithic. Linda Dittmar's suggestion, for example, that silence can be read as oppositional and empowering may be cause for optimism when analyzing characters such as Jane Shore. Marcia Pally's call for new strategies that "don't rehearse the process and rhythm of male psychology" and E. Ann Kaplan's urge that we look not

"for contradictions, but for gaps" in phallocentric discourse may provide hope for a new feminine/female aesthetic. But texts such as Olivier's *Richard III* that are rooted in a patriarchal past often prove difficult to subvert. One small consolation for women that comes out of his film is that Jane Shore is allowed to survive, which is more than we can say for Buckingham and Richard.

Notes

1. What film does to/for Shakespeare is similar to what Shakespeare does to/for Chronicle history. A selective drawing on a variety of sources, a telescoping of events, temporal distortions, and the alteration of historical characters for the purposes of narrative explication are strategies common to both Shakespeare and the filmmaker.

2. For a detailed discussion of poetic and dramaturgical representations of Jane Shore, Esther Beith Halahmi's book entitled *Angell Fayre or Strumpet Lewd*, provides and in-depth analysis of the various depictions of Shore from Thomas Churchyard's entry in *Mirror for Magistrates* to Nicholas Rowe's Restoration play *Jane Shore*.

John Boorman's *Excalibur"* A Film Resurgence

of Male Conquest Mythology

This thesis argues that in John Boorman's film version of the Arthurian legend, *Excalibur* (1981), the treatment of the female characters in Boorman's film can be interpreted as a form of celluloid misogyny signaling an epic return to male conquest mythology. There are three crucial elements dealt with in Boorman's film that reflect the desire to re-erect and reaffirm male conquest mythology: patriotism, paternity, and incest. Each of these elements becomes the site of a battle waged between genders that ultimately results in an ascendency of masculinity.

John Boorman's *Excalibur* (1981) is a re-presentation of the Arthurian legend presumably based on Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur.* Anyone familiar with Malory's text realizes that Boorman's film version is substantially different than its source. The combining of the sword in the stone and the sword offered by the lady of the lake, Morgana's deliberate incestuous seduction of Arthur, and the installation of Arthur as the Grail King are but a few of the many departures from Malory's prototype. The choices Boorman makes as film narrator (he co-wrote the screenplay as well as directed the film), the privileging of certain aspects of Malory's tale and the elimination of others, combined with the use of additional material not found in the *Morte,* all suggest a variety of contemporary anxieties and hopes regarding gender and patriarchy. Specifically, the treatment of the female characters in Boorman's film can be interpreted as a form of celluloid misogyny signaling an epic return to male conquest mythology. There are three crucial elements dealt with in Boorman's film that reflect the desire to re-erect and reaffirm male conquest mythology: patriotism, paternity, and incest. Each of these elements becomes the site of a battle waged between genders that ultimately results in an ascendency of masculinity.

Excalibur's release in the United States at the beginning of the 80's, and its box office success in this country, suggests that American audiences could also find fulfillment in a movie whose subject matter deals with "The Matter of Britain." What facets of the Arthurian myth would prove attractive to an American audience and why? The Arthurian fantasy presented by Boorman is appealing on a number of levels and to a variety of audiences. Psychoanalytic theory provides some explanation for the ways

in which Arthurian film fantasy might prove appealing to spectators. The presentation of a time when magic, sorcery, and a complementary relation with the natural world is analogous to the polymorphous pleasures of infancy theorized by Freud and Lacan. According to Lacan, prior to the formation of subjectivity we all experience the multifarious play of desires, which are eventually shaped through repression and identity into socially acceptable behavior. But as Louise Fradenburg observes, "all such identities mourn the loss of pleasures and experiences they have learned to forget. All identities are haunted by the traces of memories of proscribed pleasures" (213). The loss of the individual pleasures of our infant past, our experiences in utero and the "magical thinking of childhood," are comparable to the losses of our cultural or historical past. The scientific rationality of the modern age denigrates a belief in magic and communion with nature. Yet these beliefs were at one time viable, they were pleasurable experiences enjoyed by our ancestors and by ourselves as children.

Our sense of anxiety for the loss of these pleasures is reified through nostalgia. Boorman's comments on his film prove helpful here:

> The Arthurian legend is about the passing of the old gods and the coming of the Age of Man, of rationality, of laws — of man controlling his affairs. The price he pays for this is the loss of harmony with nature, which includes magic. As we tried to state in the film, that magic passes into our dreams and is lost — consequently we feel nostalgic about what was lost in the human past.
> (Shictman 41)

The film demonstrates a nostalgia for the coherence provided by the imaginary order (or a unity with nature) which can never be fully regained after we enter the symbolic order of individuation and detachment. Boorman claims, "Merlin is the bridge to the

unconscious. The quest is therefore a search for unity" (D'Heur 424). Many of the films in the Boorman oeuvre explore man's relation to nature and a search for wholeness or unity, particularly what has been lost by modern society which was taken for granted by primitive man.[3]

Nostalgia, then, is investigated in *Excalibur* on a psychic level, but it is also available to spectators on a more literal level. *Excalibur* was produced during the Reagan years, a time characterized by a longing for an idyllic past, a yearning for yesteryear, a resurrection of the values of family, community, and patriarchy. If there was one word that seemed to capture the tenor of the times it would be "nostalgia." Boorman allows the viewer to gaze fondly at a time when loyalty, patriotism, and community were great enough to produce the glory of Camelot. The turmoil precipitated by the assassination of President Kennedy (Camelot was often invoked as the metaphor for his administration), the angst resulting from the Vietnam War, the cynicism produced by the Watergate scandal, and the threat to sovereignty posed by the 1979 takeover of the American embassy in Tehran, all helped to beget the agenda that swept a Hollywood actor turned politician into power. This agenda was fueled by a longing for a return to/of the past, a recovery of a simpler, more moral time and ethos. Boorman's film can be seen as a visual re-creation of such a time and the movie serves as a cinematic agent of the agenda that dominated the Reagan years.

Excalibur manages to integrate both a nostalgic and a prophetic concept of history. There is little doubt of the film's attempts to operate as prophecy. *Excalibur* emphasizes what Caroline Eckhardt refers to as "the typological nature of historical

events," a perspective assuming that what has already happened in the past is likely to occur in the present or future (110). *Excalibur* offers that hope to the audience in a variety of ways, but the most telling is Arthur's speech to Guinevere after he has drunk from the Grail. He reclaims Excalibur and declares:

> I was not born to live a man's life, but to be the stuff of future memory. The fellowship was a brief beginning, a fair time that cannot be forgotten, and because it will not be forgotten that fair time may come again. Now once more I must ride with my knights to defend what was and the dream of what could be.

The possibility of a return to/of a time of former glory is the essence of this speech, and one that is certainly optimistic in tone. Arthur's quest is indeed the "stuff of dreams" and Eckhardt remarks that such prophetic expectation "invites a strongly nationalistic linkage of the legend to current events" (125). The Reagan agenda called for a return to/of the past. One of the key ingredients to such a time is the idea of community or fellowship. Where better to find such a metaphor for community than in Arthur and his knights of the Round Table, a community whose motto is "the land and the king are one." Perhaps since such actual communities were in decline in America (if they ever really existed), the promise of their return, metaphorically embodied in Arthur's court, was a particularly satisfying palliative for the movie-going public.

Arthur's boast that he is to "be the stuff of future memory" could also be especially significant for some members of an American 80's film audience. Memory is used to construct a history with which we can live. One of the greatest difficulties that emerged in the 70's was how to cope with the painful memories of the Vietnam

conflict, a war we did not win. Klaus Theweleit observes,

> When you lose a war, you lose your memory. That's the first thing to lose. The memory (of what one has done in war) is replaced by the desire to change the old war into a new war, a war that can still be won, a war that doesn't yet belong to an enemy. If you have lost the war, your memory is replaced by something called "The Search." (284)

The desire to "change the old war (Vietnam) into a new war" might be realized through a spectatorial identification with Arthur and his noble knights, and Theweleit's "The Search" can be seen as analogous to "The Quest" for the Holy Grail. The quest in Boorman's film can be read as an attempted recovery of a memory of victory and wholeness that was forfeited as a result of the Vietnam conflict. And since Perceval's search for the Grail is ultimately successful, the film could be read as a form of vicarious wish-fulfillment, especially for male spectators striving simultaneously to bury a painful past and resurrect a former time of glory.

Excalibur also provides the audience with a nostalgic concept of history. Eckhardt claims this concept assumes the "inevitable movement of history towards its apocalyptic conclusion. In this perspective, what is past remains finished and will not come again" (110). The world of *Excalibur* is the stuff of dreams, of an unrecoverable past. Boorman's proclaims that what he tried to convey to the audience was that "magic passes into our dreams and is lost — and consequently we feel nostalgic about what was lost in the human past" (Shichtman 41). Seeing the story of Arthur performed on film is one possible way of reclaiming the glittering world of Camelot; so long as there is nostalgia for Camelot, Arthur's dream world endures. As Martin Shichtman

notes, "Boorman recognizes that mankind is so fallen that there can never again be a permanent vindication of magic and reintegration with nature" (47). But the chance of a temporary recovery is still held out to the viewer. The movie serves as a fantasy that consoles as well as disciplines. Although *Excalibur* is a film about the death of a world and a world view, the Grail restores Arthurian society for a short period. The combination of the pessimism of nostalgia and the optimism of prophecy in *Excalibur* is arguably something that an American film audience would find very attractive. Nothing is more American than an optimism accompanied by a perverse sense of dread. Boorman's film provides a convenient outlet for the anxiety produced by this juxtaposition.

Nostalgia and prophecy, as they appear in *Excalibur,* are directly related to the themes of patriotism and nationalism that seem to form the central consciousness of the film. The culminating moment of the film is Perceval's solving the riddle whereby he achieves the Holy Grail. Boorman takes liberties with the literary Grail Quest tradition and imposes an interpretation that makes the central message of the film an exhortation for country and king. The director's choice of Perceval as the knight who uncovers the mystery of the Grail certainly has its roots in Malory's text, but the motivation that drives Perceval in the film is patently patriotic. Perceval pursues his quest for the sole purpose of saving an afflicted king and country. He willingly enlists after Arthur's plea that the Grail be sought in order to restore his power. His dedication to his sovereign is unwavering. He treks through rain, snow, and desert and encounters discouragement all along his journey. Despite coming across the decayed and mutilated bodies of fellow

quest knights, Perceval pushes on and eventually arrives at Morgana's castle.

Morgana attempts to corrupt Perceval by offering comfort to the knight who has "found nothing but death and sorrow" during his journey. The greatest impediment for Perceval and the other quest knights' is presented as a woman. The message is fairly obvious; the duplicitous female, and she is always duplicitous, is a menace that must be annihilated to ensure a return of the proper patriarchal order. Perceval refuses to be tempted and is sentenced to hang; he is willing to sacrifice his life rather than betray Arthur. Such commitment to cause and country is a sentiment accentuated by Boorman. Shichtman observes that "in no Arthurian source is Perceval so overcome by his devotion to Arthur" (44). Perceval usually becomes involved in the Grail quest to absolve himself of a transgression caused by his clumsiness. He selects the quest of his own volition rather than being ordered on it. In fact, Arthur rarely has anything to do with the Grail quest. He is significant only insofar as it is his knights who take up the mission. By highlighting Perceval's perseverance in the face of a litany of trials and tribulations, a perseverance that figuratively resurrects the ailing sovereign, Boorman's film seems informed by the cultural climate of the 80's. During the Reagan years, America was portrayed by the media as a nation "under siege," beset by terrorists and the Evil Empire of communism. Boorman's portrayal of Perceval could be read as an antidote for the nationalistic anxiety felt especially by the American audience of *Excalibur*; the film is a call to arms, an appeal to patriotism. Despite the fact that Boorman is British and is dealing with subject material that seems on the surface to be un-American, interpretation and appropriation are not delimited by authorial intent. We

are not all watching the same movie for the same reasons. And the popularity of *Excalibur* in the United States indicates that British history and mythology may be annexed by American audiences for their own purposes, one of which would be the reviving of the nationalistic spirit.

The question and answer sequence that Perceval engages in order to gain the Grail is another innovation with regard to the Grail quest in Boorman's film that augments the patriotic theme. Naked, except for a loincloth (the Christ imagery is obvious), he approaches the Grail and is asked the pertinent questions; his answers are most unusual, at least by traditional Arthurian standards:

> *Voiceover:* What is the secret of the Grail? Who does it serve?
> *Perceval:* You my Lord.
> *Voiceover:* Who am I?
> *Perceval:* You are my lord and king. You are Arthur.
> *Voiceover*: Have you found the secret I have lost?
> *Perceval:* Yes. You and the land are one.

With this realization that Arthur and the land are one, the Grail is achieved. Perceval brings the chalice to Arthur, who drinks from it and is restored. The questions appearing in medieval versions of the Grail quest have long puzzled scholars. These questions, which resemble the ones used in *Excalibur*, are supposed to be asked by the Grail knight, not of him. Furthermore, they are never answered. Boorman improvises here and the message of patriotism and loyalty is provided for the viewer. Perceval's appearance on the Grail quiz show and his politically correct answers are reminiscent of a patriotic pep rally or a citizenship ceremony. Boorman allows the viewer to gaze

fondly at a time when loyalty and patriotism were great enough to achieve the Grail, great enough to bring back, if just for a short while, the glory of Camelot. Such a return to/of the past might be particularly appealing to a nation suffering from the failures produced by the Vietnam conflict. The war loser's recovery of positive memories through the "Search" postulated by Theweleit, is potentially achieved vicariously by watching *Excalibur.*

Patriotism and nationalism are useless as static philosophies; they require an outlet, a method of demonstration that shows these forces at work. War and conquest are two such outlets and *man*kind's history is replete with such displays. *Excalibur* begins and ends with battle scenes and this framing device may serve as a metaphor for the masculine condition. It should be noted that all of the trouble in Arthur's court begins during a time of peace, when the land is united and the warrior caste that produced a nation is left with nothing to do. I would argue that there are many similarities between this film environment and the cultural milieu of the 80's.

One of the major dilemmas for America during the Reagan years was dealing with and overcoming the legacy of the conflict in Southeast Asia, what became known in popular parlance as the "Vietnam syndrome." The Vietnam War was a "bad" war because we lost. For many Americans, the 70's were spent agonizing over the loss of face suffered when we withdrew our last troops from Saigon. And quite often that loss of face was expressed in terms of gender. Carol Cohn notes in her article "War, Wimps, and Woman" that war talk is a gendered discourse. "Withdraw" from Vietnam is certainly coded as less than a masculine activity. The embarrassment engendered by our

nation's first military defeat was compounded by such events as the terrorist takeover of our embassy in Tehran (1979) and the ineffectual measures instituted by then President Jimmy Carter to liberate the hostages, who was subsequently labeled a "wimp'. Again, the gendered discourse is in play. Lynda Boose observes,

> [A] discernible effort [was made] to segregate remembered opposition to the Vietnam War into competing narratives so that one could be reclaimed from its antiwar affiliations and the other one anathematized....a strategic objective to generate what the Gulf War finally produced on a large scale: the parades, the cheers, the public excitement over military hardware, and the popular sloganeering about a 'new pride in America'...in short, a revivified militarism that could once again be self producing. (69)

One of the easiest ways to formulate these "competing narratives" was to gender opposition to the war as female. The antimilitary, antiviolence forces were castigated by allying them with such derogatory epitaphs as "bleeding-heart liberals" and "sob sisters." Perhaps no public figure associated with the peace movement was more vilified than "Hanoi Jane" Fonda. Klaus Theweleit asks,

> Who lost Vietnam: all those good Americans who made the individual mistake of letting themselves be turned into feeling human beings (= women) by those poor Vietnamese people; secondly, all those *not so good* Americans who didn't want to win: hippies, musicians, civil rights freaks, dems and fems. The BIG SHE had to be defeated to make America feel like somebody carrying that *thing* again.
>
> (285)

The obvious reference to phallic authority has been an American military metaphor since the birth of the nation. Recall Teddy Roosevelt's foreign policy mantra, "Walk softly but carry a big *stick*." Warfare and campaigns of conquest have always been the province of men, and any attempts to deny the necessity or justification for armed

conflict can be perceived as a threat to masculinity. Gendering such a threat as feminine obviously has many advantages. As Theweleit contends, "The war of genders is wonderful for re-winning lost wars because of its very certain result: men never lose, women have to" (285).

How does *Excalibur* fit into this discussion of the crisis of gender confronting Americans in the Reagan years? The movie can be viewed as one in a succession of 1980 cinematic documents that employs a screen iconography of masculine mastery of the feminine. Boose claims,

> The Hollywood movie has long been the popular culture site where America constructs and fine tunes its self-mythologies to fit the libidinal exigencies of its foreign and defense policies. As America's military interventionism resurged in the 1980's, filmgoers concurrently began witnessing the reascendancy — with a vengeance — of a masculine ethos so narcissistic in its need for self-display that it progressively eroded most of the space hitherto even available for female representation. (73)

The 70's were witness not only to the 2nd Wave of feminism but to a reconception of masculinity that incorporated values traditionally identified with the feminine. There was a greater openness, an intimacy, a sensitivity that could best be described as the "Alan Alda syndrome," which altered and softened the culturally determined role of the male as breadwinner and macho defender of hearth and home. The inroads made by women in the public sphere and in the workplace were accompanied by men assuming duties normally confined to the female. It was suddenly fashionable for men to share housekeeping chores and child rearing concerns, and to display emotions and feelings previously deemed unacceptable. This reconception of masculinity was reflected in American films (*Kramer vs. Kramer*, 1979). But the decade of the 80's brought with it

a backlash that disavowed and tried to undo this reconception of masculinity. Boose notes that the films of the 80's, "an oeuvre dominated by male buddy/cop films [*Lethal Weapon*, 1987], boy's rite-of-passage films [*The Karate Kid*, 1984], sons' quest-for-father films [*Top Gun*, 1986], and so-called adventure films populated by lone 'terminators' spell out a metanarrative of violent masculine reassertion and feminine erasure" (73). *Excalibur*, a 140 minute excursion into blood and destruction that takes no female prisoners can be seen as part of this ouevre.

The threat of the feminine is played out primarily in terms of sexuality in *Excalibur*. The three main female characters, Igrayne, Guinevere, and Morgana, all represent a danger to the patriarchal hierarchy figured as sexual excess. Igrayne, wife of Cornwall, is the cause of the disruption of the peace forged by Uther. During the feast held to mark the end of a prolonged war and the installation of Uther Pendragon as king, Uther is bewitched by the sight of Igrayne as she seductively dances for the entertainment of the gathered warriors. The dance of Igrayne, accompanied by throbbing, primitive music that causes the male spectators to rhythmically pound their flagons on the table, rivals that of Salome and she is visually and aurally coded as sexual excess. Uther's fascination with the female results in a brain fever that causes him to attack Cornwall's castle, fracturing the newfound alliance. Male conquest is not limited to or satisfied by the acquisition of land and power, it must also include the attainment of the body of the eroticized female. He's gotta have it.

When the fortifications of Cornwall prove too much for Uther's forces, he makes a pact with Merlin to have his way with Igrayne. The sorcerer summons the

dragon's breath and transforms Uther, who takes on the physical features of his rival. Cornwall leaves his castle to waylay Uther's forces during their retreat, unaware that the disguised king is entering his fortress. The visual cues in the ensuing scene are telling. Boorman crosscuts between the duke, impaled on ranked spears, dying in the red light of Uther's burning camp, and Uther riding Igrayne to the "little death." Louise Fradenburg points out,

> The mask — the disguise — is itself a weapon both in love and war. When we grimace at our opponents or unfurl our best feathers before our lovers, we are creating images of ourselves. We create these masks, these doubles, in order to make ourselves seen in an extraordinary way; in order to fascinate, or to ward off fascination. To make either war or love is to appear more brilliant, more terrible than usual.
> (208)

Boorman's *Excalibur* reifies Fradenburg's concept of the disguise. Uther relies on the mask provided by Merlin to conquer both his opponent and his opponent's wife. He assumes a spectacularized image that causes him to be seen in an "extraordinary way." The disguise donned by Uther enables him to violate Igrayne, and the fact that it is juxtaposed with shots of the dying duke allies sex with death in a visual and graphic manner. Helen Cixous and Catherine Clément contend in *The Newly Born Woman* that death and the female genitals are the two unrepresentable things (69). Woman and excessive female sexuality are equated with danger and death. The erotic seems to be a displaced image of death. Freud's notion of the "uncanny" is also relevant here. Freud spoke of female genitals as an "*unheimlich* [uncanny] place," which is "entrance to the former *heim* [home] of all human beings, to that place where everyone dwelt once upon a time and in the beginning" (399). Uther is figuratively perched on the edge of the

female abyss. The figure of the woman apparently represents a threat to peace and permanence.

But the rape of Igrayne can also be read as a predatory subjugation of the feminine by the masculine. The rapist mimics murder through the act of sexual intercourse. Uther's conquest of Cornwall is mirrored in his conquest of Igrayne. Her body literally becomes a battleground. Fradenburg suggests that,

> The 'ground' of the woman's body -- the change that takes place on it -- figures conflict over sovereignty; the rivals, once again, pursue, in Lacan's words, their 'deleterious dominance" over her 'sacred regions.' But she is a way of imagining a conflict whose outcome is nonetheless predetermined ("he that is king")
>
> (253)

The situation for the woman in this scenario is anything but positive. The body of women has always been the site of oppression and she becomes merely a pawn in a masculine game of one upmanship that denies her agency and volition.

Another detail that is particularly striking in this scene is the fact that Uther is shown in full armor as he ravages Igrayne. What at first seems comical may make perfect sense if we view Uther's armor as an extension of male power. Boorman bedecks all of the knights in *Excalibur* in the opulent armor we traditionally associate with them, though such helmets and breastplates did not exist in England until several centuries later. Such a marriage of directorial innovation and audience expectations results in what Brode has called "a splendid combination of authenticity and anachronism" (55). But they also illustrate a modern tendency towards a literal inflation of the masculine figure. This is more readily apparent when we think of 70's

and 80's filmstars like Schwarzenegger, Stallone, and Norris and the technologized, phallic hardware that they donned in many of their films. Boose refers to this as "techno-muscularity" and suggests that "the fortresslike body image of the masculine hero who arose in post-Vietnam America reassures its audience of a masculine dominance made invulnerable by the arsenal of high-tech killing devices that this genre obsessively imagines as necessary extensions of male body power" (74). One could read the elaborate use of armor in *Excalibur*, even in scenes where you would think a coat of mail/male would prove cumbersome (like Uther's rape of Igrayne), as a form of "retro-muscularity," a primitive visualization of masculine prowess and power. What is initially funny is suddenly deadly serious. And of course the title of the movie and the phallic symbol of authority *par excellance* is *Excalibur*, that "thing" Theweliet claims Americans needed to feel they were carrying again.

Uther's physical conquest of Igrayne certainly proves satisfying to male members of the audience wishing to turn back the wave of feminism. But there is, of course, a child that results from this illicit union and the paternity of that child becomes a key question in Boorman's saga. In fact the issue of paternity is an overriding concern for several characters in *Excalibur* and its prominence in the film may reflect another aspect of gender/power relations that the movie seeks to address or resolve.

The question of Arthur's paternity is one that appears in both Malory's and Boorman's text. In *La Morte D'Arthur*, Arthur draws the sword from the stone and is crowned King of England, but rival factions for the crown question his legitimacy, claiming he is "a beardless boy that was come of low blood" (21). Merlin arrives at

Caerleon to help settle the dispute:

> Then all the kings were passing glad of Merlin, and asked him, "For what cause is that boy Arthur made your king?'
>
> 'Sirs,' said Merlin, 'I shall tell you the cause, for he is King Uther Pendragon's son, born in wedlock, gotten on Igrayne, the Duke's wife of Tintagel.' said.
>
> 'Then is he a bastard,' they all
>
> "Nay," said Merlin, 'after the death of the duke, more than three hours, was Arthur begotten. And thirteen days after, King Uther wedded Igrayne; and therefore I prove him he is no bastard.
>
> (22)

Boorman replicates this questioning of Arthur's paternity in two scenes. When Uther visits Igrayne shortly following the birth of Arthur, the first question he asks her is "Who is the father?" Igrayne admits that she was visited by a man she assumed was her husband but later found out that he had already been killed in battle. Another scene from *Excalibur* that focuses on the question of Arthur's paternity follows his successful drawing of Excalibur from the stone. Uriens challenges the boy-king and Merlin claiming, "He's trying to foist a fatherless boy upon us. Do you want a bastard as a king?"

With the numerous changes that Boorman makes in the Arthurian legend, it is curious that the problem of Arthur's paternity survives the editorial cut. While it could be argued that the director's intention is fidelity towards his source material, it could also be claimed that this focus on paternity is over-determined and indicates an interest on the filmmaker's part that reflects concerns important to dominant, patriarchal culture. Why would the question of paternity be so important to Boorman and a 1980's American audience? The prominence of the paternity plot in *Excalibur* could be

interpreted as a demonstration of the dominant ideology's need to make stronger and stronger statements about the primacy of the father during a period of social crisis that threatens to undermine the patriarchal family structure. The social and moral climate of America in the year of the film's release was certainly one of anxiety with regard to the decline of patriarchy. The dramatic increase in the divorce rate and single parent homes along with the dilemma of "deadbeat dads" were major concerns during the 80's. Much of President Reagan's political agenda revolved around issues of domestic tranquility and the affirmation of "family values." Of course the role of the father in the traditional family is paramount and all of these paternal issues became the subject of the cinema.

For many feminist theorists concerned with the origins of women's oppression, the prehistoric discovery by men of their role in reproduction is a key moment.[4] Before recognition of paternity, by some accounts, women were assumed to reproduce on their own or in concert with the deities or nature, and were consequently viewed with awe. The power to create life seemed to put women on a par with other aspects of the natural world, and to position them above men. Once men's role was discovered, however, this interpretation of women's reproductive capacity dissolved and new rituals evolved that emphasized men's importance, including the development of elaborate kinship rituals that depended on exogamy. Efforts to prove that men were the "true" — that is, the culturally significant — parents extended to biological explanations of reproduction, and attempts persisted well into the scientific age to demonstrate that women were merely vessels for men's magical ability to create life.

This view of women's symbolic fall from reproductive power does not fully

explain the oppression of women, but there is no doubt about men's anxiety over the question of paternity. As many theorists have pointed out, this anxiety springs from the fact that no man can ever be as certain of his child's identity as is the woman who bears them; only mothers know beyond any doubt that their children are their own. Fatherhood is, in this sense, a myth — an ultimately unprovable claim that we agree to accept as fact. Of course, advances in DNA testing have alleviated this anxiety to a great extent, but this technology is relatively new and previous cultural responses to the question of paternity were predicated on the uncertainty of proving fatherhood Elaborate legal, social, and religious barriers have been raised in an attempt to ensure the "fact" of paternity, but the very existence of these regulations only serves to underline the profound anxiety that surrounds the issue. As Mary Ann Doane observes:

> Paternity and its interrogation ... are articulated within the context of ... social legitimacy. To generate questions about the existence of one's father is, therefore, to produce the insult of the highest order....Knowledge of maternity is constituted in terms of immediacy....Knowledge of paternity, on the other hand is mediated — it allows of gaps and invisibilities, of doubts in short. It therefore demands external regulation in the form of laws governing social relations.
>
> (70-71)

Both Malory's and Boorman's texts speak directly to the anxiety that demands such regulation. But these stories do not just create anxiety — they inevitably resolve it by reenacting the discovery that men, specific men, are fathers. Just as Merlin identifies Uther as Arthur's progenitor in Malory's *Morte*, Boorman has the wizard proclaim Arthur's heritage in the film right after Uriens' accusation. At no time in the film does Arthur ask who his real mother is; the question of maternity is apparently not

important.

How Boorman's and, by extension, dominant culture's anxieties over paternity operate in his film is problematic. Feminist critics have tended to argue that narrative disruptions are sites at which the feminine successfully undermines the dominant ideology. Contradiction and disruption can be interpreted as sites of resistance. While this may be true, it is also possible that these contradictions serve to reinforce patriarchy. Laura Mulvey has questioned the common assumption that contradiction automatically undermines ideology, stating that "no ideology can even pretend to totality: it must provide an outlet for its own inconsistencies" (Gedhill 75). Power is not perceived as monolithic. Her identification of 1950's melodrama as a "safety valve" for the contradictions inherent in the dominant ideology suggests a way of considering the paternity problem in *Excalibur*. The question of Arthur's paternity is an integral part of Boorman's narrative that is raised but eventually smoothed over, possibly resulting in a narrative that maintains rather than undermines the dominant ideology. The doubts raised about and the complications that arise over Arthur's paternity allows for the momentary play of women's fantasies through the workings of the paternity plot. Since Arthur's claim to power is connected to his lineage, and his lineage is uncertain, a pleasurable fissure in the patriarchal discourse is provided for women. However, that fissure is carefully managed and ultimately closed off by the reassertion of the conservative male-centered ideology the film promotes. Merlin confirms that Arthur is indeed the son of Uther Pendragon and so has a legitimate claim to the throne.

Mordred's paternity is also ambiguously coded in *Excalibur.* The spectator is aware that Morgana's child results from the unholy union with her stepbrother, and Arthur eventually becomes cognizant that Mordred is his son, but the fact remains that he is a boy without a father, a bastard. He, along with his mother, represent the greatest threat to Arthur's sovereignty and Boorman's film narrative is bound and determined to nullify this threat. However, it should be remembered that Mordred's troubled paternity may have other implications for some members of an American 80's audience. The refusal (or inability) to claim paternity can also function as a site of male privilege. There are obvious advantages for men who disavow responsibilty for offspring, not the least of which are financial. Women in the eighties were often forced to work as underpaid, single mothers without the safety net of extended family or adequate social services, particularly in black communities, where the incidence of fathers who abandoned their paternal duties was (and is) exorbitant. Perhaps the logical way of determining what function the anxiety of paternity serves in Boorman's film is to see it as both contesting and affirming the dominant ideology; it serves as a potential site of disruption for a culture that relies on the positive determination of paternity and as a locus of advantage and entitlement for fathers who either claim or deny responsibilty for their progeny. There may be something here for everyone.

A topic closely related to the various issues of paternity and their affect on gender/power relations and male sovereignty that Boorman addresses in *Excalibur* is incest. Arthur's sister Morgana, disguised as Queen Guinevere, enters Arthur's chamber and seduces him. This is no ordinary seduction; it is more like a rape.

Morgana dominates Arthur in bed; she cajoles, threatens, and mocks him. Like the mythical succubus, Morgana robs the king of his sexual vitality and she also evokes the image of the "loathly lady" in this scene. Louise Fradenburg states,

> Wild women were often conceded to be shape-changers...the most persistent and most revealing trait to wild women is their sexuality... In these versions of female wildness, beauty is an illusion; "behind" its insubstantial form lies the grotesqueri of the unruled female body, here in its terrifying aspect, its devouring intentions with respect to manhood.
> (252)

Morgana's "persistant" sexuality is obvious in her seduction of her brother and the fact that her beauty is an illusion is born out in the scene where she is murdered by Mordred. Her subjectivity is based on her sexuality and her body represents a threat to masculinity, patriarchy, and the nation.

The excessive sexuality demonstrated by the duplicitous Morgana coupled with its incestuous nature makes this '"wild" woman doubly-dangerous to Arthur (sovereignty/patriarchy), especially when she bears him a demon child, Mordred.[5] As Morgana delivers her baby, Boorman crosscuts to a scene of Arthur and his knights gathered in the chapel, as a violent storm rages outside. The presiding monks offer up prayers, "God save us from Morgana and God save us from her unholy child." Arthur is struck down by lightning and survives as a weak, damaged, emasculated ruler. It is obvious that the child born of Morgana's illicit sexual union with her brother embodies the sterility that overcomes both Arthur and his kingdom. Malory's *Morte* also details the incestuous relationship between Arthur and his sister that produces Mordred, but the key difference is that Boorman chooses to make Morgana the manipulator in the

tryst, while Malory represents the begetting of Arthur's son through his sister as a misunderstanding. The film version of Morgana as seductress is also a fascinating inversion of the conception of Arthur. Arthur's father, Uther, had enlisted Merlin's help in his seduction of Cornwall's wife, Igrayne. The deception, assuming the guise of another in order to procure sexual favors that lead to procreation, is identical in each instance except for the fact that in Morgana's case incest is involved. It is interesting that Uther's masquerade results in the birth of a king, while Morgana's ruse produces a destroyer of this king and the representations of each of these sexual deceptions is inflected quite differently visually and contextually. The progeny resulting from male lust (Uther's) is valorized while that produced by female lust (Morgana's) is vilified. That Morgana's seduction is incestuous in nature compounds spectator anxiety over her actions. Why would Boorman emphasize this particular part of Malory's myth? Theories of kinship, exchange, and the incest taboo may help provide an answer.

Gayle Rubin's treatise "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex" delineates and critiques the work of Freud and Levi-Strauss in an attempt to chronicle one of the causes of women's oppression. A key facet to this theory posits that "the essence of kinship systems lie[s] in the exchange of women between men" (171) and that this concept is crucial because it "places the oppression of women within social systems, rather than in biology" (175). The incest taboo is an integral part of kinship systems, which "imposes the social aim of exogamy and alliance upon the biological events of sex and procreation" (173). The problem of Morgana's seduction of her brother is that it challenges current cultural assumptions about the role

women play in systems of kinship and exchange. Furthermore, since Morgana is driving this bus, it vilifies a refusal of the female to conform as *object* of exchange, implying a fear of female sexuality. Luce Irigaray agrees with Rubin's assessment that our society is based upon the exchange of women:

> Without the exchange of women, we are told, we would fall back into the anarchy (?) of the natural world, the randomness (?) of the animal kingdom. The passage into the social order, into the symbolic order into order as such, is assured by the fact that men, or groups of men, circulate women among themselves, according to a rule known as the incest taboo. (170)

Marriage between blood relatives is strictly prohibited because it interferes with the circulation or exchange of women between families and groups, an exchange that cements social bonds, promotes solidarity, and fosters mutual aid.

The role of women in this system is completely passive; they are items of exchange between men, not partners in that exchange. Such a system insures male hegemony; consequently, any alteration of the system is a threat to that hegemony. Boorman's Morgana, by initiating the incestuous relationship that produces Mordred, is cast in the role of exchanger, an obvious threat to the normative kinship system. Morgana's rape of Arthur threatens the existence of the social order because she assumes the dominant role in the sexual exchange, a role normally reserved for men. As Rubin notes:

> If it is women who are being transacted, then it is the men who give and take them who are linked, the woman being a conduit of the relationship rather than a partner to it. The exchange of women does not necessarily imply that women are objectified....But it does imply a distinction between gift and giver. If women are gifts, then it is men who are the exchange partners. And it is the partners, not the presents, upon whom reciprocal exchange confers its quasi-mystical power of social linkage. The relations of such a system are such that

women are in no position to realize the benefits of their own circulation. (174)

One could argue that the greatest of these benefits is the production of new members of the kinship who will insure its perpetuation. But should a women usurp the power of exchange and re-production, then the exchange paradigm is upset. Boorman addresses the anxiety over this incestuous relationship and its subsequent production of a child who represents decadence and death by conveniently disposing of Morgana and having Arthur kill Mordred. The elimination of Morgana deserves a closer look. Merlin has tricked her into chanting the "speech of making" and the power she has used to preserve and enhance her beauty is turned against her. The "loathly lady's" beauty is revealed as an illusion and she transforms into a withered, old hag. Mordred enters her tent and, dismayed at the absence of his beautiful mother and the presence of this grotesque granny, proceeds to hack her to pieces. It's not difficult to read this as some sort of Oedipal wish-fulfillment on his part. Nor would it be difficult for the male spectator to derive a sense of pleasure out of this scenario. The 80's in America were characterized by a backlash against feminism, the urge to repudiate the feminization of the masculine, and the desire to demonstrate that we were not "momma's boys." Mordred's slaying of his mother could serve to exorcize these feminine demons that plagued many American males during the post-Vietnam, Ronald Reagan years.

That the child born of an incestuous relationship represents one of the greatest threats to Arthur's kingdom, is indicative of cultural anxieties surrounding the social dangers inherent in incest. By eliminating those threats, Boorman appears to right the

capsized patriarchal ship. Implicit in Boorman's handling of the Arthurian material is a desire to reaffirm the oppression of women because that oppression is what guarantees male hegemony. It is interesting that *Excalibur's* resolution of the incest threat, unlike Malory's, is carried out on not only Mordred but Morgana as well. Boorman's alteration of the Arthurian incest theme may signal an anxiety over the potential threat of women who challenge standard male-dominated systems of kinship and exchange. The film's solution could be seen as a response to the contemporary cultural trend of women who delay or forego marriage, or single mothers and lesbian mothers who raise children by themselves, or women that decide to keep their maiden names after they are wed.

The threat to male sovereignty and patriarchy embodied by Morgana (and Igrayne) is complimented by the peril Guenevere represents to Arthur's kingdom. It is interesting that Boorman chooses to almost immediately associate Guenevere with Igrayne by having her dance before Arthur leading to his infatuation. The parallels between the two women and the two dances positions them as sexual excess and inherently dangerous to the masculine. Additionally, Guenevere's sexually liaison with Lancelot, her dark potentiality, her capacity to betray, and the corresponding threat posed by a rival to the king's manhood is crystallized cinematically in *Excalibur*. The scene in the forest where Guenevere and the king's champion consummate their lust/love is interesting for a number of reasons. There are two visual cues that elucidate how feminine sexuality represents violent instability. After the lovers are discovered *in delicto* by Arthur, he thrusts the symbol of phallic authority between their sleeping

bodies. Lancelot awakens the next morning, espies the sword, and shouts, "The king without a sword, the land without a king." It is significant that a direct correlation is drawn between the king's phallic symbol of power and the source of that power. If the king is no longer in possession of the phallus (Theweleit's "thing') then he can no longer maintain his sovereignty. Lancelot's complicity in the adulterous act is undeniable, but I would argue that Guenevere's culpability is the one that is emphasized by the film. Consider that the scene is highly suggestive of the site of the "original sin," the primal Garden of Eden. Couple this with the second visual cue provided by Boorman, and it's difficult to interpret the scene as anything other than an overt criticism and condemnation of the woman as temptress. The director crosscuts to Merlin escorting Morgana into the subterranean cave of knowledge. The "fall" above is visually and narratively conjoined with the "fall" below. Morgana assumes the position of the voyeur, as she watches the couple copulate. This active looking on the part of Morgana, a gaze that figuratively makes her into a man, combined with the adulterous transgression of Guenevere presents a twin threat to masculinity and rightful rule. We've already seen how Boorman handles the threat of Morgana — he has her son kill her. The director has a less violent but no less severe punishment or "solution" in store for Guenevere. She winds up in a convent where not only her excess sexuality but her chance for any expression of sexuality is negated. It is unclear whether Guenevere is mewed up in the monastery by personal choice or the king's fiat; however, it is clear that female sexuality is considered dangerous and must be either eliminated or repressed if male conquest mythology is to reign supreme.

I have tried to illustrate how the elements of patriotism, paternity, and incest in *Excalibur* all work as mechanisms that promote male conquest mythology usually at the expense of women, and how the cultural climate of the 80's encouraged male filmgoers to expect and embrace this mythology. There is one scene in particular that can be read as a metaphor for the entire movie. When Gawain (Liam Neeson) insults Guenevere during a feast at Camelot, questioning her relationship with Lancelot and intimating her unfaithfulness to Arthur, a tournament or joust is arranged whereby the king and queen's honor can be defended by their champion. In many ways, this tournament is a microcosm of the film. *Excalibur* can be seen as a continuous tournament, enacted for the benefit of men who wish to validate masculinity and their power over women. Fradenburg notes the medieval tourney's value as "a training ground for war, its significance as an exercise in which great prizes could be won, and as a social gathering of a certain kind of elite" (194). If we were to translate this explanation into modern uses of the tournament, we might find that they are not significantly different.

Excalibur can be read as a "training ground" for war, especially when we realize that many American spectators would soon be involved, either literally or figuratively, in the conflicts in Grenada, Panama, Libya, and the Persian Gulf. Not only are the numerous and graphic battle scenes in *Excalibur* a rehearsal for real wars to come, but they also can serve to "replay" abortive conflicts of the past (like Vietnam) in a manner that recuperates them. Arthur and his armies are almost always successful in their engagements with the enemy and war and battle are valorized in the film as normal

and productive masculine pursuits. Barbara Ehrenreich reminds us in her Forward to Theweleit's *Male Fantasies* that "it is not only that men make wars, but that wars make men. For the warrior cast, war is not only death production, but a means of *reproduction* (xvi). As I mentioned earlier, the real problems for Arthur and his kingdom seem to occur during a time of peace and stasis, while the opportunities for glory, conquest, and male satisfaction all seem to occur when war ravages the land (and screen). The film seems to revel in its plethora of crude battle scenes and violent physical tests of masculine courage and endurance, and *Excalibur* portrays an unsanitized version of violence. There is a curious symbiosis established by the film between the glory and the gory. One need only recall such scenes as Uther's conquest of Igrayne juxtaposed with the violent and graphic death of Cornwall (complete with bloody spikes that protrude from his chest), the dramatic rescue of Leondegrance's (Patrick Stewart) castle and daughter, one of Arthur's finest moments, accompanied by the hewing and hacking of several unfortunate opponents, or the penultimate scene in which Arthur and Mordred "embrace" each other in a death grip, bringing an end to the battle for Britain with Arthur's forces seemingly victorious. This "embrace" is comprised of Mordred running a six-foot spear through the body of his father, while Arthur skewers his son on the blade of Excalibur. Boorman's combination of the appealing and the appalling within the same *mise-en-scene* suggests an intimate relation between the two. The film would have us believe that destruction, or the production of death, is integrally related to reproduction, or the making of men. Theweleit assures us that "Men want to be products of their own labor. (They don't want to born by

mothers. From Plato to Goebbels, men called that way of birth 'the wrong way.')" ("The Bomb's Womb" 291). This is particularly relevant if we recall the privileging of paternity and the erasure of maternity in *Excalibur*. The film seems to validate the production of death as a way of life with men as the primary players. Such a viewpoint might be attractive to a male audience anxious to escape the emasculation resulting from the 60's and 70's.

What might be the reason behind Boorman's accentuation of the barbaric and the savage? Fradenburg suggests that such visual re-enactments of violence illustrate an anxiety over "the loss of a particular kind of violence — free, unruled, autonomous — to particular techniques of management: to the civilizing, centralizing, and mechanizing of the warrior's aggressivity" (197). This feeling of loss, this alienation from violence, would have been particularly strong during the post-Vietnam years when a "feminization" of the masculine supposedly occurred. A decade whose mantra became "All we are saying is give peace a chance," was obviously not a comfortable time for men raised on a tradition of militarism and masculine prowess. The negative fallout of the Vietnam War threatened to serve as a "coitus interruptus' in the nation's repetitive pattern of armed conflict every twenty to twenty -five years. Fradenburg also states that the loss lamented here "is in part the result of the scholar's own voyeuristic exclusion, his own 'feminization' as spectator who grieves over the onset of rules and the 'fall' from uniform (imaged as 'necessary') to costume (197). *Excalibur* may have been seen by 80's male film audiences as a potent antidote to the malaise created by the "fall from uniform" resulting from American withdraw from Vietnam, the peace

movement, and the feminist/feminization agenda.

Fradenburg claims that the second value of the medieval tournament is "its significance as an exercise in which great prizes could be won." Perceval attains knighthood by volunteering to answer Gawain's challenge at the tournament when Lancelot is tardy. Certainly social status and class mobility were two of the benefits produced by the tourney. Another dividend resulting from tournament display was that women could be "won." The ritualized tournament becomes a means whereby the masculine is put on display for the purpose of impressing the female spectator and "conquering" her heart. Fradenburg notes, "The shift from violence to ritual, reality to representation, is linked with the growing importance of women — as spectators, as queens of beauty, as participants in disguisings — to tournament display" (192). Of course, women's roles as spectators of the tournament are not really empowering; instead, they are depicted as passive consumers of a masculine image and ethos. The same could be said of female film spectators who "consume" *Excalibur*. While the possibility for male identification with the noble knight who preens and performs for the female audience results in a potential virtual or vicarious gain for the male viewer, the female spectator's options are limited to primarily passive positions. Even if women identify with the strong and subversive characters of Morgana and Guenevere, this is ultimately a "masochistic" identification judging from the harsh treatment these women receive by the end of the film. The only real prizes to be gained from the tournament, whether we are referring to the medieval or cinematic variety, are all for men.

The final value of the tournament identified by Fradenburg is that it is "a social gathering of a certain kind of elite." Particularly in the modern context of tournament, we can read this "elite" as masculine. All the possible benefits accrued from the tournament are directed towards and realized by men. There is little to nothing here for women other than the chance to "watch" as men go about the business of being men. The tournament is a test of manhood, a place where fathers and sons alike confirm their authority, while women look on in admiration or idolization (or horror). Again, the cultural climate in America during the 80's led to a proliferation of tournament/war/battle films that helped to resurrect a male conquest mythology threatened by the Vietnam War, the women's movement, and the "feminization" of men occurring in the previous two decades. The tremendous growth of the military-industrial complex in America during the years of the Cold War, demanded some sort of outlet. Overseas' arms sales and the Vietnam conflict provided some relief, but the stockpiling of weapons and munitions caused a potentially catastrophic shift in philosophy. Barbara Ehrenreich suggests, "As more and more human and material resources are appropriated by the warrior caste, it becomes harder and harder to draw the line between production, as an innately purposeful human activity, and the production of death" (xii). This confusion over the meaning of production finds expression in the "techno-muscularity" identified by Boose that appears in so many 80's films, *Excalibur* among them. American audiences could appropriate Boorman's film as part of its masculine conquest mythology, where America as "chivalric knight arrogant" once again sets out to vanquish the forces of opposition and/or evil. That this evil is so

often associated with the female and feminine sexuality in *Excalibur* seems to indicate a conscious or subconscious desire on the part of the director and film audiences to reinscribe the power of patriarchy and male conquest mythology that had been challenged in the decades preceding the Reagan years.

Notes

1. *Deliverance* (1975) is a backwoods adventure where Louis and his companions attempt to recapture the primal scene of man in nature, *Exorcist II: The Heretic* (197) concerns itself with supernatural powers and the forces of good and evil, while *The Emerald Forest* chronicles the experiences of a young boy who is lost in an Amazonian jungle where he is adopted by a primitive tribe known as the Invisible People who are a part of their world, not competitors with it.

2. There are many expositions on the role of paternity in women's oppression, including Engel's *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State;* Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*; Gera Lerner's *The Creation of Patriarchy;* and Peggy Reeves Sunday's *Female Power and Male Dominance: On the Origins of Sexual Inequality.*

3. The gothic-*mise-en-scene* of Mordred's birth is strikingly evocative of the birth of Dr. Frankenstein's monster, another progeny who ultimately destroys his creator.

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